

Fall 2006: Central Oaks & Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods

By Bert Frenz

This report is reduced from 4051 sightings of 313 species from 1 August to 30 November 2006.

WEATHER REPORTS:

Tim Fennell, 1 August, Williamson Co., "Migration and post-breeding dispersal were in evidence as I birded the Granger Lake area of eastern Williamson Co. ... The lake is about two feet low. "

Rich Kostecke, 4 August, Bell Co., "... on Fort Hood's East Range (Bell Co.) - Airfield Lake, Engineer Lake, and Cowhouse Creek Arm of Belton Reservoir. We had some really nice late-summer birding. In particular, species richness and numbers of waders and shorebirds are the best I have seen during my 4 years at Fort Hood. Perhaps the only positive spin I can put on the drought and high temperatures is that the Belton Reservoir water level has fallen dramatically, creating plenty of waterbird habitat."

Peter Barnes & Matt White, 26 August, NETFO Newsletter, East Texas, "The hot dry weather and extremely low water levels at local lakes resulted in reports of more shorebird migrants than usual, and a good variety of waterbirds and raptors were also reported."

Rich Kostecke, 31 August, Bell Co., "Continued low (and still dropping) water levels [on Belton Lake] are providing good habitat for waders and shorebirds (though the recent cool front seemed to push out some of the waders). ... Upland habitats are exhibiting visible and sometimes extensive signs of heat/drought stress. Most the songbird activity was concentrated near areas that are still holding water."

Rich Kostecke, 16 September, Bell Co., "A few of the smaller lakes (Airfield and Engineer) are still productive, as well as Belton Lake. In regards to the latter, water level continues to fall. However, I guess with some of these fronts that have hit recently, a lot of the waders and shorebirds have moved on as numbers were a bit lower."

Rich Kostecke, 4 November, Bell Co., "Later on the morning of 4 Nov, I visited Iron Bridge Park, which is situated along the Leon River just upstream from Belton Reservoir (Bell Co.), ... Water levels are quite low, so the river is actually channelized and looks like a river. Under "normal" water levels, the Leon River spreads out more as it becomes Belton Reservoir, forming backwaters, shallowly flooded mudflats, gravel/sand bars, and the like that can be productive for

waterbirds. Not today. Those areas are now dry and overgrown with smartweed. It is actually quite a ways out to the waters of the lake now. The distance and tall smartweed made scoping out waterbirds difficult."

MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:

After being viewed almost weekly for more than 10 years a wild **Snow Goose** was no longer seen after 17 Aug (Keith Arnold); it first appeared in the spring of 1996, when it took up residence with domestic geese and ducks at Country Club Lake in Bryan, *Brazos*.

Although always common on Stillhouse Hollow Lake in *Bell*, a count of over 2000 on 4 Nov (Jeff Hanson, et al.) is a record high for **Canvasbacks** in the Oaks & Prairies region.

Making a one-day appearance, a **Surf Scoter** was at Hornsby Bend on 19 Oct (Eric Carpenter).

Five **Hooded Mergansers** at Belton, *Bell*, on 4 Nov (Randy Pinkston) were early; a count of 85 on 9 Nov (David Brotherton, Mark Edmund) at Texas Eastman in Longview, *Harrison*, is notably high.

Rare, but regular, a **Red-breasted Merganser** was on Kurth Lake, *Angelina*, 12 Nov (Louis Debetaz).

A high concentration of 50 **Northern Bobwhites** fed in a recently burned area of Fort Hood in *Bell* on 2 Aug (fide Rich Kostecke). Bobwhites had a reportedly (Jim Hinson) good season on the Katy Prairie of *Waller*.

A **Horned Grebe** at Stillhouse Hollow Lake in *Bell* 3 Nov (Randy Pinkston) was quite early.

An **Eared Grebe** visited the Nacogdoches ponds Oct 27 (Carol Wells); according to David Wolf, "This species has become very rare and irregular in our area."

Ponds at Richland Creek WMA in *Freestone* held an impressive number of long-legged waders, including 300 **Great Egrets** and 50 **Great Blue Herons** on 23 Aug (Peter Barnes)

Remarkably far inland and presumably a county first record, a **Reddish Egret** was at Proctor Lake in *Comanche* on 3 Sep (D.D. Currie, Dell Little). Singles, or possibly the same bird, were also found at Canyon Lake in *Comal* 14 Aug (David Pueppke), at Kizer Golf Course in *Travis* on 29 Sep (fide Eric Carpenter), below Longhorn Dam of Town Lake 2-20 Oct (Homer Rushing) and at Stillhouse Hollow Lake in *Bell* for a long stay from 28 Oct (Eric Stager) into Dec (Rich Kostecke).

A juvenile **White Ibis** in *Bell* on 4 Aug (Gil Eckrich, Rich Kostecke) was a first record for Fort Hood.

East Texas, particularly Lake Sam Rayburn in *Angelina* and Lake Tyler in *Smith* (fide Peter Barnes), had their best ever season (spring or fall) for *Plegadis* - presumably **White-faced - ibis**, being present 13 Aug – 21 Oct with a peak of 27 at Marion Ferry on 30 Sep (David Wolf, Robert Truss).

With only one prior record for **Wood Stork** in *Smith* in the past 9 years, four reports at 2 locations 9-19 Sep (Peter Barnes) are notable.

A seven hour vigil proved fruitful for Brush Freeman on 12 Oct when he estimated 5800-6000+ **Turkey Vultures** migrating over Utley in *Bastrop*. Brush remarked, "At one point a solid 14-16 min stream of birds stretching from horizon to horizon NW to SE."

A high count for **Osprey** in the Oaks & Prairies is 10 on 8 Nov (Brush Freeman) at Lake Fayette.

Unprecedented in modern decades, post-breeding **Swallow-tailed Kites** spread across the Oaks & Prairies in substantial numbers: singles 6 Aug (Fred & Kassie Collins) in *Grimes* (second county record), 12-26 Aug (Hayden Haucke, Peter Barnes, et al.) in *Freestone* (second county record and a record length of stay), 18 Aug (Johnny Fife) in *Waller* (third county record), 26 Aug (Darrell Vollert, et al.) in *Washington* (fifth record since 1855) and three nearby that day (John Berner) in *Waller*, two 26-27 Aug (Brush Freeman, Shelia Hargis) near Utley in *Bastrop*, one 26-31 Aug (fide Eric Carpenter) near McDade in *Bastrop*, five 2 Sep (Eric Carpenter) at the Brazos River separating *Washington* and *Waller*, one 16 Sep (Phil Rostron) near Utley. The previous record number of reports for the Oaks & Prairies region is 5, set in 1998. Joel Simon, HWI Site Coordinator for the Corpus Christ Hawk Watch, remarked, "Swallow-tailed Kites have a nine-year average median date of August 25 and this year's season-to-date median date stands at August 17... an amazing eight days earlier. On 8-17 we had our one day record of 21 and it would take another 9 to change it even one day, again not likely. So indeed we did have an early kite migration. Although not completely understood, one reason is that more and more of both species are now nesting closer to the site." The final count at the hawk watch was 83 between 15 Aug and 4 Sep.

A single **White-tailed Kite** reported in *Bell* on 6 Sep (Randy Pinkston) and 3 in *Angelina* 29 Sep (Nancy Bird) are rare for these counties.

Two fledglings and an adult **Mississippi Kite** were photographed at a nesting site in Round Rock 4-7 Aug (Tim Fennell), providing a first nesting record for *Williamson*.

Harris's Hawks swept north of their typical range, with singles sighted 26 Aug at Richland Creek WMA in *Navarro* (D.D. Currie, Dell Little), 26 Aug (Noreen Baker) in *Bastrop*, 19 Nov (Herb Smith) in *Hays*, and 27 Nov (Cliff Shackelford) in *Travis*. The *Navarro* sighting is likely a county first record, although in 2000, one was found just across the border in *Freestone* at the same Richland Creek WMA.

According to David Wolf, "The weak cool front on Sept 28 brought the best **Broad-winged Hawk** flight detected in many years, with a total of 2509 over Alazan Bayou [*Nacogdoches*] and Marion Ferry [*Angelina*]."

The same day, 12 Oct, that Brush Freeman counted the flood of migrating Turkey Vultures he estimated at least 6600-7200 **Swainson's Hawks** passing over *Bastrop*, a substantial count for the area.

One to two Single **Zone-tailed Kites** were reported at Wimberley, *Hays*, on 30 Oct - through end of period (Herb Smith) and singles were at Uteley in *Bastrop* 7-12 Nov (Brush Freeman) and 11 Nov (Leslie Lineham) in *Comal*.

An early **Prairie Falcon** was observed 23 Sep – 9 Dec (Tim Fennell) in the Granger area of *Williamson*, and another was along the south shore of Lake Belton in *Bell* on 29 Sep (Gil Eckrich).

One to two **Virginia Rails** took up residence at Hornsby Bend 28 Oct to end of period (Eric Carpenter, m.ob.).

Eight **Soras** at Richland Creek WMA in *Navarro* on 7 Oct (D. D. Currie, et al.) was a high count.

Unexpected **Common Moorhens** were seen at Texas Eastman at Longview in *Harrison* on 30 Aug (Eddie Ray) and at Fort Hood in *Coryell* on 10 Nov (Gil Eckrich), the later being only the second record for the fort.

A week earlier than the prior record for **Sandhill Cranes**, two at the Navasota River in *Brazos* were well described on 20 Aug (John Miller); except for an injured bird on 8 Jul 2004 the earliest migrants to the Oaks & Prairies region was 27 Aug 2003.

On 4 Nov (Dennis Chical) a **Whooping Crane** was seen around the lakes of Cedar Park in *Williamson*.

The atypically exposed mudflats attracted more than usual numbers of migrating **Black-bellied Plovers** in Central and East Texas, with sightings at Hornsby Bend in *Travis* 12 Oct (Gary Newgord), an extremely long stay of 2-12 from 23 Oct to 26 Nov (Randy Pinkston, et al.) at Stillhouse Hollow Lake in *Bell* and several locations around Lake Tyler in *Smith* 1-10 Nov (Ron Gutberlet).

Two **American Golden-Plovers** in *Williamson* on 12 Nov (Tim Fennell) were late.

Setting a early arrival record in recent years, a **Mountain Plover** was photographed on 3 Sep (Tim Fennell, Byron Stone) at Willis Creek Park in *Williamson*. The only other early record dates back to 27 Aug 1921. Peak count this fall is 37 on 19 Nov (Tim Fennell).

Two **Black-necked Stilts** in Temple 27 Aug (Randy Pinkston) was rare for *Bell*.

The latest record in the Oaks & Prairies region for fall migration of **Upland Sandpiper** was set 5 Nov (Randy Pinkston) in southeast *Bell*.

A **Sanderling** at Belton Lake in *Bell* on 2 Aug (Randy Pinkston) was early.

A late **Baird's Sandpiper** visited the expansive mudflats of Stillhouse Hollow Lake, *Bell*, on 4 Nov (Devin Bosler).

It seems **Dunlins** migrate through the Blackland Prairies and the edge of the escarpment west of the Post Oak Savannah and the coastal prairies east of the Post Oak Savannah, but are rarely seen down the central corridor, probably because of an absence of suitable places to stop over. Thus 2 Dunlin at Shipp Lake in *Bastrop* on 8 Nov (Brush Freeman) is one of very few area records and the first to be reported in the literature.

Long-billed Dowitchers were reported extensively and repeatedly in central and north-east Texas from 1 Aug to 23 Nov, with high counts of 60 at Westberry Landing in *Smith* on 15 Oct (Ron Gutberlet), 70-72 at Stillhouse Hollow Lake in *Bell* 21-24 Oct (Randy Pinkston, Rich Kostecke), and 90 at Lake Tawakoni in *Rains* on 29 Oct (Richard Kinney, Ron Baltzegar).

A **Wilson's Snipe** in Temple, *Bell*, 16-19 Aug (Randy Pinkston) was exceptionally early. The two earlier records for the Oaks & Prairies region are 28 July 2003 in Temple and 12 Aug 1967 at Lake Somerville.

Undoubtedly the best bird of the fall season for the Oaks & Prairies region is the **Red Phalarope** that appeared 23 Oct (Randy Pinkston, Paul Pinkston) at Union Grove Wildlife Area on the shores of Stillhouse Hollow Lake in *Bell*, a first county record. The basic plumaged phalarope was viewed almost daily (m.ob.) until 14 Nov when a strong cold front blew through the following day. Curiously, a few days later – 18 Nov (Pat Jeane, Sherrie Roden, Steve Mays, et al.) – another basic plumaged Red Phalarope was found in west *Jefferson*. It remained until 21 Nov (Joseph Kennedy).

A **jaeger**, not identified to species, was an incredible, albeit distant, find at Lake Palestine on 1 Sep (Ron Gutberlet) and a first county record for *Henderson*.

A rare fall migrant and the only one reported this season for the Oaks & Prairies region, a **Black-billed Cuckoo** visited the Navasota River bottoms of *Brazos* on 2 Sep (Darrell Vollert).

An early arriving **Burrowing Owl** was in the Granger area of *Williamson* on 15 Oct (Tim Fennell).

Near downtown Austin a freshly road-killed **Long-eared Owl** was collected on 1 Nov (fide Eric Carpenter, specimen Texas Memorial Museum/Texas Natural Science Center).

A very rare find was a male **Common Poorwill** at Union Grove Wildlife Area in *Bell* on 1 Nov (Randy Pinkston). At Commons Ford Park, west of Austin, two were identified on 23 Aug (Ed Fair), where they were also located last year.

Exceptionally late **Whip-poor-wills** were found in East Texas. The first was heard from 6:30 to 8:00 PM at Lake Ratcliff in *Houston* on 10 Nov (Anthony Hewetson); the second was a road-kill found the next day (Anthony Hewetson) in *Angelina*. [No Nov records are shown in the East Texas bird checklists and 1 Nov is the latest for the Oaks & Prairies region].

Two occurrences of late migrant Chaetura swifts are suspected as being **Vaux's Swifts**. In late Oct a single swift near Pedernales Falls State Park, *Blanco*, passed through some weeks after Chimney Swifts had left the observer's three towers (fide Paul & Georgean Kyle). On 30 Oct (Brush Freeman) in Utey, *Bastrop*, a flock of 20-25 Chaetura swifts flying above and/or at the same level as Sandhill Cranes were probably Vaux's based on flight jizz.

Only the second record for north-east Texas, a **Green Violet-ear** visited a *Bowie* feeder 9-10 Sep (Julia Amburn) and was confirmed by photographs (identification by Charles Mills).

A 9-13 Aug (Jennifer Prihoda, ph.) visit to La Grange feeders of a **Buff-bellied Hummingbird** is a first record for *Fayette*. Elsewhere, several again summered and remained in *Washington* and *Austin*, another was in Austin, *Travis*, on 31 Aug (Mollie Kloepper), and one was viewed 17 Sep (fide Eric Carpenter) at Palmetto State Park in *Guadalupe*.

A leucistic **Ruby-throated Hummingbird** with pink legs, pink bill and a dark eye was mostly white elsewhere. It was observed and photographed 5-6 Sep (Karen Arquette) at Lacy Lakeview in *McLennan*.

Two **Black-chinned Hummingbirds** visited feeders in *Rusk* on 12 Sep (Peggy Harding).

A **Broad-tailed Hummingbird** was at *Rusk* feeders from 26 Aug to 11 Sep (Peggy Harding). This is only the second record for the East Texas Pineywoods, the first being at the same feeders from 12 Nov 1998 to 16 Apr 1999. More expected, but still rare, are 1 in *Travis* 24 Sep (Ted Eubanks), 2 in *Guadalupe* 1 Oct (Ernest Jasek), and 1 in *Bastrop* 11 Nov (Brush Freeman).

A **Rufous Hummingbird** in Hearne 23-27 Oct (Debra Corpora) was a first county record for *Robertson*.

Green Kingfishers continue to expand in Central Texas with sightings this season on the San Gabriel River at the Dickerson Bottoms access 6 Aug (Tim Fennell) and Brushy Creek 8 Nov (Trey Kelley), both in *Williamson*; Table Rock Creek on Fort Hood in *Bell* (a first confirmed sighting for the installation) 5 Oct (Gil Eckrich, Tom Greene) and on Piney Creek north of Bastrop (Phil Rostron, as well as Boggy and Wilbarger Creeks in *Bastrop* (fide Brush Freeman).

A female **Red-naped Sapsucker** was photographed along the Blanco River 6.5 mi. upstream from Wimberley in *Hays* and observed 3-28 Nov (Herb Smith). For a first county record in *Bell*, a male Red-naped was in Temple on 4 Nov (Randy Pinkston).

A **Hammond's Flycatcher** 27-28 Aug (Brush Freeman) was reported near Utley in *Bastrop*, identified by field marks and voice. This is the third or fourth record for the eastern half of Texas, which includes a well documented one 16 Feb 1987 at Bastrop State Park, another sighting at the same location on 9 Oct 2002 and a tentative identification of one in *Williamson* on 10 Oct 1998.

Single **Vermilion Flycatchers** were reported 17 Oct (fide Eric Carpenter) at Granger Lake in *Williamson* and near Speegleville in *McLennan* 17-24 Nov (Dan Roberts).

The only report of **Great Kiskadee** in Central Texas this season was one heard only at Webberville County Park in *Travis* 7 Nov (Brush Freeman).

A few Scissor-tailed Flycatchers remained in Central Texas through the end of the period.

Becoming regular in *Nacogdoches*, a likely family group of 6 **Bell's Vireo** were present in Douglass 18 Jun to 13 Aug (Carol Wells). One singing in Utley in *Bastrop* 14 Sep (Brush Freeman) is less expected as were 2 at Webberville County Park in *Travis* 2 Sep (Brush Freeman). Yet another was reported 25 Aug (Rich Kostecke, Gil Eckrich) at Fort Hood in *Bell*.

A **Philadelphia Vireo**, very rare in north-east Texas in fall, was at the Old Sabine Bottom WMA in *Smith* 7 Oct (fide Peter Barnes). Previous north-east Texas fall records are in September only.

A first regional record for the Austin area checklist is a **Green Jay** seen for about two weeks in Sep (fide Todd McClanahan) near the Copperas Creek campground at Bastrop-Buescher State Park.

At the integration boundary between **Tufted Titmouse** and **Black-crested Titmouse** two incidents bear interest. On 5 Nov (Randy Pinkston) in *Bell* near its *Williamson* border two well-marked Tufted Titmouse accompanied by a phenotypic Black-crested and one 'brown-crested' hybrid titmouse". Similarly, on 26 Nov (Tim Fennell, Byron Stone) one apparently pure Tufted Titmouse and one apparently pure Black-crested Titmouse foraging with a mixed species flock at Willis Creek Park, *Williamson*.

Rock Wrens have not been reported in *Bell* since the mid-1980s, so one seen at Union Grove Wildlife Area on Stillhouse Hollow Lake on 1 Nov (Dan Callaway) came as a surprise. Then 18-19 Nov (Rich Kostecke, Randy Pinkston, Paul Pinkston) 1-2 more were seen at Chalk Ridge Falls Park on the same lake, the same park where they were known in the 1980s. Coming at even greater surprise is a **Rock Wren** at Lake Wright Patman in *Bowie* on 5 Nov (Mike Dillon). This is the easternmost record in Texas since the 1960s. Amazingly, two more were at Lake Tawakoni State Park 7-28 Nov (Richard Kinney) and yet another at Lake Tawakoni in *Hunt* on 7 Nov (Richard Kinney).

Golden-crowned Kinglets first appeared 21 Oct (Darrell Vollert, Mark Bartosik) and were reported widely in the Oaks & Prairies and in good numbers through the end of the period.

A well-documented **Gray-cheeked Thrush** is a first fall record for the East Texas Pineywoods, seen 10 Nov (Anthony Hewetson) at Lake Ratcliff in *Houston*. The thrush is a very rare fall migrant in the eastern half of the state and the 10 Nov date may well be a record for the state as it is later than that described in the TOS Handbook of Texas Birds, the UTC checklist and all regional checklists.

An unusually high count of 52 **Northern Mockingbirds** in a large patch of retama and young soapberry trees at Webberville County Park in eastern *Travis* on 2 Sep (Brush Freeman) suggests an infrequently observed migration of the species.

An **American Pipit** in *Rusk* on 16 Aug (Peggy Harding) was extremely early by a month; there were no prior north-east Texas records for August.

A **Nashville Warbler** on 4 Sep (David Wolf) was the earliest fall record by 5 days for the *Nacogdoches* area and Nashville's were late on 19 Nov in *Bell* (Rich Kostecke) and *Travis* (fide Eric Carpenter).

An East Texas Pineywoods late record is 3 **Chestnut-sided Warblers** at Lake Sam Rayburn in *Angelina* on 21 Oct (David Wolf, Robert Truss).

Unexpected is a **Black-throated Blue Warbler** on 23 Oct (Sam Fason) at McKinney Falls State Park in *Travis*.

Single **Palm Warblers** were reported 8 Oct (Tim Fennell, Byron Stone) on the *Bell-Williamson* line and 5-26 Nov (Ed Fair) at Commons Ford Park in *Travis*.

Extremely late was a **Louisiana Waterthrush** in *Travis* on 20 Oct (Kenny Anderson).

A window-killed **MacGillivray's Warbler** on the Texas A&M University campus was collected 20 Sep (Andy Conkey, fide Keith Arnold, specimen TCWC), providing only the 3rd county record for *Brazos* and the first since 1980.

For *Williamson* with no prior county records for **Hooded Warbler**, it is surprising to have two discoveries: a male on 26 Aug (Kelly Holligan) in Round Rock and a female on 23 Sep (Tim Fennell) at Granger Lake.

Spotted Towhees were particularly common in Central Texas this season, starting with an early arrival 22 Oct (Brush Freeman) in *Bastrop* and topped off with an amazing 22 in *Guadalupe* at Scahezler's Warbler Woods on 14 Nov (Susan Schaezler).

An **Eastern Towhee** at Flag Pond in *Lee* tied for the earliest arrival date of 21 Oct (Darrell Vollert, Mark Bartosik) for the Oaks & Prairies region.

While finding a **Henslow's Sparrow** in *Tyler* on 11 Nov (Anthony Hewetson) is not surprising for the East Texas Pineywoods, it is another story to get two sightings in Central Texas this season. At the Schaezler property in *Guadalupe* one was observed 17 Nov (Don Schaezler, Rex & Barbara Naden) and another at Willis Creek Park in *Williamson* was photographed 26 Nov (Tim Fennell, Byron Stone). The *Guadalupe* sighting may be a first county record and the *Williamson* bird is a second county record.

An impressive count of 35 **Le Conte's Sparrows** was recorded at Granger Lake on 26 Nov (Tim Fennell, Byron Stone).

McCown's Longspurs were found in the Granger area of *Williamson* on 26 Nov (Tim Fennell, Byron Stone).

Black-headed Grosbeaks turned up in unlikely places, including singles in *Washington* 18 Sep (Darrell Vollert), at Alazan Bayou WMA in *Nacogdoches* on 14 Oct (David Wolf, Robert Truss), and at La Grange River park in *Fayette* on 8 Nov (Brush Freeman), the later being a first county record.

An earliest ever Pineywoods record by 2 weeks is a **Western Meadowlark** at Lake Rayburn, *San Augustine*, on 13 Oct (David Wolf).

Few **Pine Siskins** were reported this season, but 6 at Fort Parker State Park, *Limestone*, were unusually early on 26 Oct (Roy Smallwood).

A **Lesser Goldfinch** on upper Elgin river road in *Bastrop* was east of its normal range, seen 25 Oct (Brush Freeman).

Alternately plumaged **American Goldfinch** appeared at three locations in Waco, *McLennan*, in late August (fide Mel Grider). The first report in the East Texas Pineywoods was not until 27 Oct (Carol Wells) in *Nacogdoches*.

CONTRIBUTORS:

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